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SOCIAL, HUMANITARIAN AND
HUMAN RIGHTS QUESTIONS:
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
QUESTIONS

Interim report on the world social situation

Report of the Secretary-General

1. At its twenty-ninth session, the Commission for Social Development expressed the view that the report on the world social situation should be prepared at four yearly intervals. For the session held in intervening years, the Commission wished to have before it a draft framework for the forthcoming report to allow the Commission to make suggestions in regard to the preparation of the report and an updated report on the main issues and trends of international concern that had emerged since the last report. In its resolution 1985/21 of 2 May 1985, the Economic and Social Council endorsed, inter alia, the Commission resolutions. The last report was prepared in 1993 and the next report is due in 1997 for consideration by the Commission at its thirty-fifth session. Section I of the present document contains a brief updated report on the main issues and trends in the world social situation and section II contains a draft framework for the 1997 Report on the World Social Situation. The report is submitted to the Council at its substantive session of 1995 and the General Assembly at its fiftieth session, pursuant to Assembly resolution 44/56 of 8 December 1989.

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I. AN UPDATE OF MAIN ISSUES AND CONCERNS

2. There has been an unprecedentedly intense discussion of the world social situation at the international level since the preparation of the 1993 Report on the World Social Situation. 1/ The present report will not repeat those discussions but will present some highlights mainly to place in perspective the framework for the 1997 Report on the World Social Situation. The discussions have mostly related to six major United Nations conferences dealing directly with social development questions, four of which have been concluded and two of which will be held later in 1995 and in 1996. The six conferences are the International Conference on Nutrition (Rome, 1992), the World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993), the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) and the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Istanbul, 1996). This massive upsurge of interest is evidently consequent upon a perceived deterioration in social conditions, the incapacity of current paradigms, institutions, policies and programmes to address effectively problems of social development and the earnest desire of Governments to harness national and international strengths to meet these challenges. Numerous organizations of civil society, for their part, have been keen observers of, vociferous protagonists for and active participants in the improvement of social conditions the world over. These discussions have demonstrated that social conditions are diverse, that they are fundamentally interconnected and that there are multifarious policy responses, which do not always work with the same results. They have brought to light the interdependence between economic and social development and conditions of peace as well as the necessity for policies and programmes to be perceived by the public at large to be in their best interests.

3. The process of globalization continues to gather speed. During the period 1989-1994 world trade grew at rates two to four times faster than world output. The new World Trade Organization can be expected to raise these rates further. Capital markets are interconnected as never before, both because of greater freedom from controls for the movement of funds and new technology which enables such transfers. For both highly skilled and unskilled labour, there is a global market bidding for physicians, surgeons, engineers, managers and computer scientists at one end and maids, chauffeurs and gardeners at the other. The movement of people between countries has become easier, again both because countries have removed certain barriers and because relative costs of travel have come down. Information and ideas float more freely between countries, mainly because new technology provides enormous opportunities which cannot be barred by Governments and costs of such transfer have come down drastically.

4. The greater openness of economies to trade in goods and services and for capital transfers has markedly reduced autonomy in each country for deciding economic and social policy. Actual or expected changes in relative real rates of interest can quickly affect the direction of capital movements. Regional associations of countries, whether the European Union, the Association of South-East Asian Nations or the North American Free Trade Agreement, decide upon or recommend norms for social legislation, some of which decisions can be enforced with the force of law. Norms established by intergovernmental organizations cover increasingly larger areas of social legislation. International

non-governmental organizations carry their experience from one country to another. The growth of an intelligentsia, although small in several countries, has enabled the analysis of social conditions and situations to be undertaken more frequently and in greater depth than previously. The work of specialized agencies and programmes of the United Nations system, especially the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), have contributed to these processes. In general, economic and social policy in each country is now made in the context of an interdependent world far more than it was even five years ago.

5. Slow and negative growth in total output continued in most economies of Africa, reducing incomes, consumption and the quality of social services. Bad weather, industrial strife, civil conflict and adverse international conditions all contributed to limiting opportunities for economic expansion. The situation in economies in transition is often difficult to assess in full, although in the few countries where reliable statistical information is available there is evidence that economic growth has resumed in some of them. Economies elsewhere grew at a pace substantially higher than at the time of writing the 1993 Report on the World Social Situation. The upturn is most marked in developed market economies, which account for some 75 per cent of total world output. Total output in these economies grew by 2.5 per cent in 1994 and is projected to grow by more than 3 per cent in 1995. Economies in South and South-East Asia continued their high growth rates, exceeding 6 per cent per annum. The peace accords in Western Asia and peaceful conditions in Lebanon contributed to concentrate attention on reconstruction and development in Western Asia. In Latin America growth decelerated to about 3 per cent per annum and severe shocks to the economy of Mexico in late 1994 may pose new problems. In the light of these developments, the main issues for consideration include those of maintaining non-inflationary growth and the resumption of economic growth in Africa and in economies in transition.

6. Continued rapid growth in most Asian economies can be expected to have contributed to expanding economic opportunities and reducing poverty in a region which contains the largest number of poor people. Official estimates in China record remarkable success in reducing poverty. Marked progress has also been achieved in Chile and Uruguay. In Cuba social conditions worsened as the economy faced grave difficulties. In Afghanistan, Angola, Haiti, Mozambique, Rwanda and Somalia internal conflicts contributed to worsening conditions of poverty. In most of sub-Saharan Africa economic conditions did not improve sufficiently to reduce poverty. In economies in transition significant sections of the population suffered marked declines in their standard of living. The experience in a wide variety of countries demonstrates that rapid economic growth has helped reduce poverty. It remains an issue of much concern that there is yet to emerge practical policy prescriptions to address these problems with other and additional means.

7. Claims for equality between men and women at all levels in all spheres of activity gained momentum in the course of preparations for the forthcoming Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995). Much knowledge has been gained about inequality between men and women in levels of well-being, in access

to income-earning assets and social services and in sharing power, whether in families, enterprises or institutions of Government. The incidence of family violence in which women are often victims has also been highlighted as a major problem. Many Member States have instituted policies and programmes to reduce and eventually eliminate these gross inequalities and to protect females from violence in the family.

8. The scarcity of adequate employment opportunities continued to be a common feature in 1994. Even where the increase in the pace of economic growth was most pronounced, as in developed market economies, rates of unemployment, especially among the long-term unemployed, remained high. In India, where average wages in real terms have risen somewhat, there is substantial unemployment, especially among those with university education. In economies in transition, economic organizations and institutions have not come into place to ensure functioning markets; labour markets were some of the weakest. High open unemployment continues to be a major problem in some countries. Hidden unemployment, primarily in rural areas, is a major problem in some other countries. There are several issues of major concern: rapid growth itself does not ensure a rapid rise in employment opportunities; education and training by themselves are inadequate solutions to these problems; it is extremely difficult to re-absorb older workers whose skills have become obsolete; and institutional changes are far slower to materialize than most people had expected them to be.

9. In most instances, where there is statistical data, there is evidence that income distribution is more uneven now than a decade or so earlier. Exceptions are countries in Asia growing consistently at very high rates. The worsening income distribution in economies in transition is on account of their abandonment of a set of economic and social institutions which set out purposefully to secure a high degree of equality in incomes and living conditions. The situation has been aggravated by high rates of inflation, which eroded real income in the hands of fixed income receivers, new opportunities for accumulating wealth available to a small minority of persons and the breakdown in social security arrangements in the former economic and social system. In China regional differences in economic well-being continued to be sharpened. At issue is the enormous problem of reconciling incentives for growth with problems that arise in strategies that emphasize equality in the distribution of output.

10. Structural adjustment programmes in many developing countries have been very slow to show salutary effects. There is far less enthusiasm now for sudden sharp changes in policies (shock therapy) than for slow, piecemeal and gradual changes in the light of the more stable and rapid growth in the centrally planned economies in Asia in contrast to disruptions and slow recovery of those in Europe, where changes were complete and sharp. The differences in changes in political systems between these two sets of countries must not be lost sight of in such comparisons. Major issues are the pace of changes, the sequencing of changes and the mix of policies in structural adjustment programmes.

11. There were rightfully celebrated victories for peace, democracy and human rights in Haiti, Mozambique and South Africa and in the negotiations between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. There are promising signs of peace in Angola, Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka. The short lived civil war in Yemen, the continuing problems in Rwanda and erupting conflicts in the

territories of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics were added to the civil conflicts reported in the 1993 Report on the World Social Situation. Fighting within the territories of the former Republic of Yugoslavia was most destructive. United Nations intervention in these situations has been costly. One consequence of wars waged during the last decade or so has been the large number of persons who have been displaced in their own country or have been forced out as refugees. Another is the large number who have been maimed and disabled. Land mines laid in the course of these civil wars still pose a serious threat to the resumption of normal activity in several countries. The prevention of these and similar other conflicts, the mitigation of the severity of conflicts and the reconstruction of economies and societies severely crippled or destroyed in the course of these conflicts remain challenges of great importance.

12. Institutions of governance are in the process of change almost the world over. They are becoming more democratic, more transparent in their conduct and more accountable to the public. However, the extent to and the manner in which these institutional changes take place are governed by the political cultures of each society, giving rise to much controversy. There is an almost universal urge to limit the size of government, especially to divest itself of business undertakings, to reduce tax burdens and to hold down the growth of public debt. These tendencies are being met by contrary forces which require governments to provide certain infrastructure, eliminate degrading poverty and support the expansion of the rights of individuals and groups who received little protection under the law in the past. The individuals are mainly children and spouses, especially women. The groups comprise the poor and minorities, including indigenous peoples.

13. The continuing growth in importance of non-governmental organizations is a part of the process of institutional change in most societies. The value of their contributions have been clearly seen internationally when they have responded to alleviate suffering in situations of natural and man-made disasters and in their participation in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992) and in the preparatory process for the World Summit on Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995). They also have been active at the national level espousing particular causes and filling, to some degree, the vacuums left by the withdrawal of Government.

14. The increased incidence of crime and its adverse impact on individuals and communities is a growing concern in many societies. It poses challenges to policy makers in several areas and tests the capacity of the criminal justice system adequately to dispose of cases and to mete out deserving punishment. In economies in transition delays in establishing new organizations and institutions have permitted the outcrop of crime and violence in societies where their incidence was very limited. In developed economies crime and violence have blighted much of urban life. In some developing economies, where Governments have not had adequate capacity to establish law and order, normal economic and social life has been severely disrupted. The most effective and efficient ways of preventing criminal behaviour, the means for the timely disposal of cases and the nature of deserving punishment are all very widely debated.

15. Rapid changes in institutions and technology have made this last decade one of much greater uncertainty and insecurity than earlier. The changes in institutions are most vivid in economies in transition. However, they are not insignificant in other societies. Attempts to reform "welfare as we know it" is one of them. Rethinking the role of Government is another. The decline in trade unionism is a third. Changes in family structure is a fourth. Changes in techniques both in production processes and management have been both massive and rapid, although not uniform in spread among countries. Processes of production have undergone enormous changes with automation and other similar new processes. A remarkable feature of the new technology is that even small-scale enterprises can employ them to gain marked improvements in productivity. New techniques of management are being adopted on a wide scale in both large and small-scale enterprises. These new products and techniques require new skills, which older persons had not learnt and now find difficult to acquire. Security of jobs, security of welfare and other payments by Government, emotional security in family relationships and the security of trade unions have all been lost at one and the same time on a large scale. The provision of social security, in its broadest sense, is a major responsibility which remains to be addressed.

16. This rapid overview is presented in order to highlight the main trends and issues that have emerged since the issuance of the 1993 Report on the World Social Situation. They will be fully addressed in the 1997 Report on the World Social Situation, as indicated in the draft framework.

II. A DRAFT FRAMEWORK FOR THE 1997 REPORT ON THE WORLD SOCIAL SITUATION

17. The draft framework for the 1997 Report on the World Social Situation takes into account the main issues and trends of international concern that have emerged since the last report on the world social situation was prepared. The 1997 Report, as earlier, will discuss both the social situation and relevant policy options.

18. The 1997 Report will be written in the context of the conclusions of the six major United Nations conferences relating to the world social situation mentioned in paragraph 2 above and unusually rapid change in several fundamental social and political institutions and economies. There is widespread concern that these changes have contributed to a widening of inequality in societies and an exacerbation of conditions of poverty. The functions of government are being redefined and its organization, legitimacy and accountability are being seriously reviewed. The form of government is increasingly democratic. Organizations in civil society have sprung up to espouse an enormously wide variety of interests. The workplace and the way people organize themselves for work are subject to major changes under the onslaught of relentless changes in processes of production and exchange. The family as an institution, which among other things provides care for young children, is being transformed under pressure from new social forces, especially as women increasingly work away from home. Countries and peoples are being brought together more closely than ever thanks largely to advances in technology and more open markets and borders. As peoples and societies in Asia, including Western Asia, gain economic strength in

this more closely connected world, world visions informed by the Chinese, Indian, Islamic and other cultures are contributing more to the formation of ideas and ideals of societies and social institutions. The unifying theme in the 1997 Report will be the manner in which individuals, associations, Governments and whole societies respond to the challenges posed by these rapid, widespread and fundamental changes.

19. The 1997 Report will deal with a large number of issues. Those that are more closely linked to one another will be grouped in discrete clusters.

20. The first cluster will deal with demographic changes and their social consequences. The evident and projected massive growth in population, although at a declining rate, makes it necessary to discuss the nature of pressures that such growth places on eco-systems and economies. The continuing changes in age composition have consequences on education, employment, medical and health care and social security provision. The rapidly changing economic structures generate pressures inducing internal migration; these changes and their social consequences need examination. Large marginalized populations are grouping in urban conglomerations both in developed and developing countries. A part of that process of movement of people is international migration and the social situation of these migrants needs discussion.

21. The second cluster includes "traditional" social sector concerns: nutrition, health, housing, sanitation and education. Patterns of government expenditure on social services will be discussed here. Newer findings, both in human and social sciences, bring new insights into the formulation of effective policies in nutrition and health. Education, as a contributor to human resources development, is being looked at with sharper focus, especially to find out the most productive combination of training in schools and universities, and the work place itself. Access to these services by various groups in society, especially females, and the way economic and social policies have affected accessibility will also be discussed.

22. The third cluster has to do with economic transformation and adjustment policies and their consequences for the social situation and policies. The problems are acute in the formerly centrally planned economies, which are in economic transition and are implementing major reform programmes. In those developing economies where economic growth has not taken place, serious problems of poverty and low productivity employment have been aggravated. Unemployment, especially among the educated, is a problem of major significance in several developing countries. Where formal sector employment fell, underemployment became more rampant. Rapid technological change in developed economies and their increased flexibility bring forth new challenges. Long-term unemployment, especially among those over 45 years of age, is a major problem in most countries members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

23. The fourth cluster has questions of social security as central concerns. Social security is being questioned in developed economies, is being reformulated in the formerly centrally planned economies and is being designed and redesigned in many developing countries. The policy options being debated

have significance for resources allocation, long-term growth and poverty alleviation.

24. The fifth cluster deals with crime and policies for the prevention of crime. Protection from crime as a factor enhancing the quality of life has risen in prominence with the increase in crime, drug trafficking and pressure on the criminal justice system in many countries. The incidence of crime has increased significantly in the economies in transition. There is new research on patterns and incidences of crime in urban areas in developing countries. Criminal behaviour among the youth is a widespread phenomenon. The increasing availability of low cost firearms among criminals has made criminal behaviour highly destructive. There are differences in approaches to the prevention and deterrence of crime: some emphasize the economic and social factors that dispose individuals to criminal behaviour and see improvements in these conditions as a solution; and others emphasize the value of speedy and deterrent punishments meted out to convicts. They lead to different strategies and programmes, the relative value of which need to be examined.

25. The sixth cluster will be devoted to an overview of the situation and policies related to children, youth, the aged and the handicapped. Child labour is a widespread problem. Drug abuse, criminal behaviour and marginalization from mainstream activities are major problems with youth populations. The tendency for people to live longer and changes in family structures give rise to problems in providing health services and other care to the aged. The number of handicapped persons has increased dramatically in countries where land mines have been widely used in military conflicts.

26. The seventh cluster will include a discussion of aggravating situations caused by ethnic and religious conflicts in many societies, causing, among other things, large refugee and internally displaced populations. The responses from various agencies, both national and international, will also be discussed.

27. The eighth cluster will contribute to the continuing debate on the nature of people's rights - both on their content (political and economic) and on their nature in different societies. Balancing the rights of individuals and the interests of the society of which they form part is an age-old problem, which has arisen again with the strong assertion of individuals rights. Special rights are claimed for those needing protection, such as children and women and those whose lifestyles differ fundamentally from the majority in their societies. There also has developed the idea of a right to development, the nature and content of which deserves examination. A final question is how all these claims stand together to foster an integrated and well functioning society.

28. The ninth and final cluster will discuss evolving relations between the Government and the market from the points of view of growth and efficiency, as well as equity. The neo-classical paradigm of a market pays primary attention to the efficient allocation of resources. However, societies are interested both in the attainment of efficiency as well as in fairness in the distribution of the output. Societies are also interested in allocating resources inter-temporally because they wish to see rising incomes and this may become impossible because of, among other reasons, a rapid draw down on capital in the

form of natural resources. Growth may become physically unsustainable. Governments can represent the interests of those generations to come. The development and expansion of markets themselves may require governments to perform particular functions. There can be highly fruitful partnership between Government, private enterprise and the rest of civil society, arriving at which is, in practice, the most interesting exercise.

29. Changes and improvements may be made to these proposals, especially in the light of the conclusions of the World Summit for Social Development.

Notes

1/ United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.IV.2.